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ABSTRACT

An agenda to make historical analysis an integral part of public policy analysis in higher education is outlined. It is argued that the history of higher education should have a prominant place within higher education as a field of research, planning, development, and administration. Rather than claiming that a knowledge of the history of higher education provides lessons to prevent bad decisions, it is suggested that serious study of the history of higher education should provide contemporary leaders with a grasp of the complexities, not the simplicities, of the past. To achieve this aim, graduate students and future leaders need to be exposed to studies that disprove convenient stereotypes. In addition to knowing the important episodes of the history of higher education, it is proposed that contemporary administrators and policy planners use the methods, sources, and logic of the historian in considering higher education issues. For example, historical research can be essential for reconstructing the origins and rationale for low tuition and no tuition policies at state institutions. Historical research on administration and campus structure can also be useful in constructing organizational theory. (SW)

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The History of Higher Education:

An Agenda for the Useful Past as a Lively Art

by

John R. Thelin

The College of William and Mary

For Presentation on 15 March 1985

Association for the Study of Higher Education

Chicago, Illinois

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Introduction

Twenty years ago Andy Warhol predicted, "In the future everyone shall be famous -- but only for fifteen minutes each." My concern is that the history of higher education may already have used up its figurative fifteen minutes and needs to devise a plan for an encore. When was the brief encounter with fame? 1971 was a very good year which included the following high points:

* Lawrence Stone's essay on the history of higher education was featured as the lead story in The New York Review of Books -- not a bad litmus that the field had appeal to the nation's intelligentsia.

* Several outstanding scholars, including Lawrence Cremin, Richard Hofstadter, Wilson Smith, Laurence Veysey, and Frederick Rudolph, had

recently published major works central to the history of higher education.

* The topic showed signs of attracting a new generation of young scholars. Here I cite the 1971 issue of The History of Education Quarterly as a prime example: Editor Paul Mattingly used the theme of "The Liberal Arts College" around which to organize superb articles by James Axtell, David Allmendinger, Hugh Hawkins, and David Potts. Lively writing, sound revisionist research, and new research questions suggested a bright future.

Thus, fifteen years ago the history of higher education was influential and interesting; it was "news." Not only did it sustain the interest of both mature and young historians, it also enjoyed cross-fertilization with sociology -- as suggested by the articles and books of Burton Clark, Martin Trow, David Riesman, and Christopher Jencks.

For all this accomplishment and promise the subsequent decade has been disappointing. I find little evidence that major funding agencies ever recognized the history of higher education as an important research emphasis worthy of substantial or enduring support. By the late 1970s when the National Institute of Education's announcements finally made some overtures to attract proposals in organizational history, the offer was "too little, too late." N.I.E.'s available funding was miniscule. If this was not Paradise Lost, it was at very least an opportunity lost.

Nor was there compelling evidence that historical studies gained acceptance as a primary discipline within Schools of Education. Eugene Webb's 1966 classic work, Unobtrusive Measures, provided the rationale and invitation for inclusion of historical methods in the research effort associated with the social and

behavioral sciences. But there were few offers for historians to join the research projects of educational psychologists. Large scale educational research continued to be dominated by reliance on attitudinal and survey data -- even though Webb, et al, had warned that such over-emphasis was waning both in excitement and validity.

This is not to say that in the fifteen years since 1971 there has not been excellent work in the history of higher education. Rather, the irony is that this work has been under-funded and under-acknowledged in the larger sphere of educational research. Allow me to cite a sampling of works which hint at the intellectual strength of the topic:

* John Whitehead's Separation of College and State (1973) upset simplistic notions of "public" and "private" affiliation for colleges and universities -- not only in the colonial period but in the 19th and 20th centuries as well.

* Marcia Synnott's The Half-Opened Door and Harold Wechsler's The Qualified Student, respectively, brought critical analysis and exhaustive data to the polemics of current debate on access and admissions.

* Bruce Leslie's 1977 historical case studies of Pennsylvania colleges showed how institutions have changed identity and affiliation over time.

* Richard Angelo fused urban history with the study social structure and higher education by looking closely at who went were to college -- and what they studied -- in Philadelphia between 1873 and 1906.

* David Allmendinger's Paupers and Scholars (1975) relied on analysis of student records at New England colleges in the early 19th century to show

that the historic campuses were not merely a place for a homogeneous wealthy elite.

The point is that historical research on higher education published in recent years has been neither arcane nor insignificant. My lament is that such good work has not enjoyed a secure base -- either from external funding agencies or from Graduate Schools of Education -- from which to assure its continued health and ability to attract talented young recruits. The agenda I propose is intended to save the history of higher education from this precarious status , i.e., to help it achieve its rightful and legitimate place in educational research and development.

One argument is that the history of higher education ought be sui generis a discrete area of study. By this standard, it is an activity by and for historians of higher education. Certainly I find this attractive -- but also a bit indulgent and incomplete. This arrangement must be supplemented by some concern for making the history of higher education appealing to audiences other than historians. Hence, my concern is with the question, "How might the history of higher education provide a 'useful past' which is a 'lively art'?" In short, I seek a prominent place for historical studies within higher education as a field of research, planning, development, and administration.

The "Content" Rationale

One obvious and familiar rationale for including the history of higher education as part of the education of presidents, deans, and trustees is that ignorance of the past may lead one to repeat the mistakes made earlier in colleges and universities. According to this rationale, a graduate course in the history of higher education provides convenient "lessons from the past." It is

hard to reject this truism, but it does need important caveats. First, there is no guarantee that knowledge of the past can prevent one from making bad decisions. Second, there is the fallacy of rushing to the conclusion that the past is merely the present writ small, i.e., a premature over-emphasis on the dimension of continuity or a wrong-headed belief that "history repeats itself." If one thinks it important to be familiar with the episodes of colleges and universities over time, I propose the following revised claim: serious study of history of higher education ought strive to provide contemporary leaders with a grasp of the complexities -- not the simplicities -- of the past.

To make good on this approach, it is essential that graduate students and future leaders be exposed to the studies which unravel convenient stereotypes. For example, most surveys of the history of higher education give considerable attention to the legacy of the land grant colleges-- such notions as public service, popular access, applied research, and the large, rural campus. Although there is much truth to that depiction, studies in recent years complicate the image by demonstrating that many of these characteristics were neither unique to nor pioneered by the land grant institutions. Or, an increasing number of case studies show that most land grant programs originally were affixed to historic "private" colleges. The upshot is that a good course in the history of higher education will offer "content" which make the legacies of higher education more than a succession of facile "success stories"

Most graduate schools provide for this kind of course as part of the doctoral program in higher education. Its limit is that it is "content specific." At worst, the specific information is accepted as a static body -- possibly useful for reference, but not readily accepted as a way of viewing issues and problems. In

addition to considering the content of the history of higher education, I propose to include attention to the methods, sources, and logic of historian as part of the research and decision-making preparation of future leaders in higher education. So, in addition to knowing about the important episodes of higher education's past, contemporary administrators and policy planners might learn to bring the historian's analytic tools to bear on issues in higher education. This is an agenda item which I think has some potential for shifting historical study from passive acceptance of information from secondary sources into an active research and planning strategy.

The "Critical Methods" Rationale

In recent years a key instrument in the formulation and presentation of policy in higher education has been the commissioned "report." At the national level, for example, we have the frequent studies and recommendations of the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, joined in the past two years by highly publicized reports by federal panels on the condition of public schooling, the undergraduate curriculum, the humanities, ad infinitum. At the state level, 1202 commissions and state higher education councils regularly publish "issue papers" on selected topics. And, at the campus level, presidents and boards have devoted increasing time and resources to preparing mission statements and long range planning documents. Usually such reports spawn a ritual of discussion and point-counter-point. And, the reports usually are based on an implicit or explicit view of past conditions. Here, then, is an area where familiarity with the logic, sources, and methods of historical analysis can be a "useful past" contemporary issues in higher education.

In many states, for example, legislatures and state councils have been asked to examine funding and tuition policies. Historical research can be essential for reconstructing the origins and rationale for "low tuition and no tuition" policies at state colleges and universities. A few years ago in California the state's independent colleges relied on a combination of historical and contemporary data to test the conventional wisdom that low tuition at public campuses promoted educational access and socio-economic diversity. The finding was that there was little evidence in the past or present that low tuition was a successful strategy for attracting a diverse student body; to the contrary, the allegedly "elite" independent campuses were found to be enrolling a substantially larger percentage of minority and lower income students than were the state university campuses.

Recent reports by the Association of American Colleges and other groups have decried the erosion of the liberal arts core of the undergraduate curriculum. However, careful case studies of a variety of institutions in the late 19th and early 20th centuries deflate some claims to liberal arts purity now advanced by various colleges and disciplines. At many campuses, such "established" liberal arts disciplines as history, economics, and government were pioneered in the professional schools of commerce and not allowed as part of the traditional bachelor of arts curriculum. A sharp eye for historical detail can assist one in testing the foundation and premises which undergird much of the polemics and advocacy.

For over a decade the professional literature in higher education has talked about a "managerial revolution." Worth noting is that this transformation in structure and leadership may well have a place for historical analysis as a part of

institutional planning. Consider the following observation by George Keller in his 1984 work, Academic Strategy:

> To think strategically is to look intensely at contemporary history and your institution in it and work out a planning process that actively confronts the historical moment, overcomes it, gets on top of it, or seizes the opportunities latent in it. A campus with an academic strategy has a battle plan to get stronger and better in the teeth of historical conditions. (pp. 143-144)

Keller's resid 1 message is that, "Academic strategic decision means that a college, school, or university and its leaders are active rather than passive about their position in history." To accept Keller's invitation is going to require rigorous analysis of the distant and recent past -- and the ability to connect historical interpetation with present and future plans. Is not this a proper task to which higher education doctoral programs ought be committed? This approach to the "useful past" certainly has been essential to recent planning and positioning efforts. Malcolm Moos' 1983 University of Maryland Report, The Post Land Grant University, relies on fresh interpretation of the land grant legacy in Maryland and in other states as an historical base from which to advance a bold new direction for the state university of the late 20th century. In similar vein, the Kentucky Council of Higher Education's provocative report, In Pursuit of Excellence, draws from a decidely historical foundation from which generates an interesting case whereby the state council urges both the legislature and the state university to awake from historical complacence about quality in higher education.

The crucial element in making the history of higher education a useful past and a lively art is acknowledgement that the recent past is both important and researchable. Hence, if Richard Angelo finds that a century ago there were

subtle and complex reasons why one would choose to go to the University of Pennsylvania rather than Temple, or finds that the field of medicine had no clear status edge over the liberal arts course, the question arises: "Why not have historians ask comparable questions and rely on the same kinds of data for 1960, 1970, or 1980?" I think Harold Wechsler is on the right track in his ability (and, daring) to study both past and recent episodes of access and admissions in his book, The Qualified Student. If one can reconstruct and critically interpret the policies and practices of admissions at the University of Michigan in 1905, then one can use comparable strategies and ask similar questions about admissions at the City University of New York in 1965.

Making connections between past and present is essential for forceful, influential writing. Chester Finn's Scholars, Dollars, and Bureaucrats is especially intriguing because the author has not left a void between an insignificant (or, unstudied) past and contemporary situations. Since the two are intelligently fused, Finn's observations and recommendations demand consideration.

The Useful Past and Organizational Theory

The agenda I have outlined thus far has been primarily concerned with making historical analysis an integral part of public policy analysis in higher education. There are, however, other foci which deserve attention. Since "organizational theory" has ascended in popularity among higher education researchers over the past five years, allow me to comment on some potential contributions which historical study might introduce to this topic. Many of the studies which purport to contribute to organizational theory rely heavily on attitudinal surveys as a

primary data source. In other words, one uses questionnaire responses of a sample of middle level administrators from which to build analysis -- and eventually, generalizations -- about the ways in which colleges and universities behave. The danger is that this relies on self-reporting as opposed to actually observing or reconstructing how campus personnel spend their time and give priority to their activities and values.

Historical research on administration and campus structure can provide a useful leavening in construction of organizational theory on several counts: it counters the myopia and preoccuppation with the attitudes and conditions of the present; it relies on artifacts, traces, and data which indicate what campus personnel actually did -- rather than what they said they did; and, historians' use of documents, records, architecture, and a host of unwieldy materials provide a way to get at the collective behavior and context of the institution -- rather than relying on questionnaires' profiles of aggregate behavior. Consider the impact of Laurence Veysey's The Emergence of the American University on our thinking about structure, bureaucracy, and administrative styles in American higher education. Ironically, apart from Laurence Veysey and W. H. Cowley, historians usually are not considered central to organizational theory today. The study of higher education is the weaker for this avoidance.

Conclusion

Allow me to conclude with a brief anecdote which shows how an historical approach to the analysis of educational issues and institutions can face double jeopardy. Last year I petitioned to have a research sequence in historical and qualitative methods be accepted as an alternate track to coexist with

experimental design in the various doctoral programs. One colleague on the review committee came by my office to discuss the proposal and started with the question, "Isn't this historical research rather impressionistic and 'soft'? Isn't this usually an easy option by which graduate students avoid the difficult courses in advanced statistics and experimental design?"

I answered with a series of questions; namely, I asked my inquisitor if he were familiar with the research logic, rigorous methods, detailed sources, and contributions assqciated with many of the authors and works to which I have alluded in this paper. His closing comment was, "Well, the research approaches and methods you describe are interesting and legitimate. Frankly, however, they probably are too difficult for our graduate students to acquire as part of their doctoral program." So, the historical approach to educational analysis is dismissed as either "too soft" or "too hard." My lament is that the hegemony of relying on attitudinal surveys often persists for the wrong reasons. At worst the code is that it is all right to do superficial survey research studies which are limited in time, space, and perspective -- without equal accomodation for novice efforts in bringing historical methods and sources to bear on issues. This may be the inertia which provides the institutional barrier to developing the "useful past" as a lively art.